

## Access to Animas River closed after Gold King Mine spills toxic metals into water

By Dan Schwartz *The Daily Times*  
Updated: 08/08/2015 01:41:43 PM MDT

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Gerald Gonzalez, of Farmington, expresses concern on Friday about the plume in the Animas River while standing on a bridge on U.S. Highway 550 near La

- Aug 9:
- Navajo Nation, San Juan County officials continue to handle toxic waste plume
- EPA says 3 million gallons of contaminated water released into Animas River
- Aug 8:
- Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye to declare state of emergency
- Gov. Martinez tours toxic plume in Animas River
- Questions remain as toxic mine contamination flows through San Juan County
- Mine waste in Animas River reaches Farmington
- Aug 7:
- Residents asked not to use well water from Animas, San Juan rivers
- Officials: EPA mishandled Silverton mine pollution discharge
- Aug 6:
- Colorado mine spills pollution into Animas River

AZTEC — San Juan County Executive Officer Kim Carpenter declared a state of emergency Friday night and closed access to the Animas River throughout the county.

Earlier in the day, Environmental Protection Agency officials said they suspect toxic metals are suspended in a plume of mustard-colored pollution washing down the river. On Wednesday morning, an EPA team investigating the Gold King Mine north of Silverton, Colo., breached a wall of sediment releasing at least 1 million gallons of contaminated water. An orange mass of pollution then washed down a creek in the mining town that feeds the Animas River.

EPA officials said late Friday that the plume likely contains arsenic, lead, zinc, copper, aluminum and cadmium, but they were unable to confirm the amounts. The agency has come under fire for waiting nearly 24 hours before notifying impacted communities of the release.

Officials will hold a public meeting to discuss the river contamination at noon today in the Farmington Civic Center, 200 W. Arrington St.

Martin Hestmark, assistant regional administrator for EPA Region 8, said in an interview that probably a "couple hundred" gallons a minute are still seeping into the river. "That's my guess," he said.

New Mexico Environment Department Cabinet Secretary Ryan Flynn said the mine is a federal Superfund site — which means it is severely contaminated — and he said estimates of the amount of contaminated water released will increase.

"I can tell you that it was much more than a million gallons," he said in a briefing Friday evening in Aztec. "The amount of contamination that was visible today—it was staggering."



*The Animas River flows on Friday near the Colorado-New Mexico line. The river is contaminated with toxic metals.*

State and local officials who flew above the river in a helicopter estimated the trail of pollution was more than 45 miles long. But they turned back before they reached the mine because they needed to refuel.

Meanwhile, EPA officials are trying to catch the leaking mine waste in a pond near the mine to treat it before more of it reaches the river. The surge that spilled through the breach had a pH of 4.5, which is slightly acidic.

State and local officials expected the plume would pass through Aztec midnight Friday and Berg Park in Farmington by 7 a.m. today.

A San Juan County Sheriff's Office helicopter has been flying over the river about every 30 minutes to track the plume's movement. Officials estimated it is moving at about 1 to 2 miles an hour.

Farmington and Aztec shut down pipes that pump water from the Animas River to water treatment plants, and officials say both cities have weeks of stored water.

Flynn said residents who drink from wells within floodplains should test their water before bathing in it or drinking it. A floodplain map can be found at sjcoem.com.

Environment department staff will test water samples brought in by residents at the San Juan County Fair from Monday through Saturday for free. However, department spokeswoman Allison Scott Majure said the number of test kits are limited.



*A plume of suspended toxic metals flows down the Animas River*

San Juan County has set up potable water stations for residents at Center Point Fire Station No. 1 at 16 Road 2755, Flora Vista Fire Station No. 1 at 2 Road 3275 and Valley Fire Station No. 4 at 4 Road 6200, according to a press release from the city of Farmington.

The stations will be open from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. today and Sunday.

Residents must bring water containers

south of Durango, Colo., on Friday.

and no large tanks will be allowed,

according to the release.

State, municipal and tribal officials ask that people and their pets avoid contact with the river, not allow livestock to drink its water and not catch fish until further notice. State officials ask that ditch users not draw water from ditches.

Federal, state and local officials are sampling the rivers in different spots to determine contamination levels.

Navajo Nation officials Friday afternoon issued a precautionary notice for the San Juan River, downstream from its confluence with the Animas River in Farmington. Drinking water is "unaffected" from the Beclabito, Gadii'ahi, Nenahnezad, San Juan, Shiprock, Tsé Daa K'aan and Upper Fruitland chapters, according to the notice.

"There's no immediate threat to the drinking water for all communities along the San Juan River," said Merle Chischilly, a senior environmental specialist with the Public Water Systems Supervision Program in the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency. He said those communities are using water from the city of Farmington.

Navajo Nation Council Speaker LoRenzo Bates said in a statement that county officials notified his office about the spill.

"Although the U.S. EPA continues to state that the contamination does not pose detrimental threats, I strongly urge nearby chapters and our people who reside near the San Juan River to refrain from using the water for any purposes until a thorough evaluation is completed," Bates said.

The speaker added that Navajo Agricultural Products Industry officials have said the spill will not adversely impact water delivery from the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project because it does not receive water from the Animas River.

Before the EPA released more detailed information about the spill, Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye criticized the agency's inability to provide information about the contaminants.

"We are demanding from the U.S. EPA an immediate release of detailed information on the type of contaminants that is flowing into the river from the Gold King Mine. This is an all too familiar story on the lax oversight responsibility of the U.S. government," Begaye said.

Don Dufur, an Aztec resident, started following the orange plume down the river at 11 a.m. Friday after hearing about it on the news. He was one of about a dozen people standing on a bridge over the Animas River in Cedar Hill waiting for the plume to come into sight.

"I live down here on the river bottom," he said. "I have animals. I have a well for my house."

He said he depends on the Animas River.

Dufur currently has bottled water to drink while he determines whether his well is contaminated.

"You plan for the worst, hope for the best," he said.

Shane and Amy Dickson stood on another Cedar Hill bridge upstream from where Dufur was waiting and watched as the orange plume mixed with the blue-green water.

The onlookers pointed to a place where people would jump into the river from some rocks. In the deep water the color changed more slowly, but soon it also was orange.

The Dicksons live in Cedar Hill and depend on well water.

Their family has been in Cedar Hill for the past 30 years and have never before needed to ration water.

"I don't think we have a 90-day supply, but we're OK for now," Amy Dickson said.

State and county officials had blasted the EPA earlier in the day saying its response to the spill was irresponsible and cavalier. Many officials said the EPA downplayed the event Wednesday and Thursday.

In a meeting in Durango Friday afternoon, EPA Region 8 Administrator Shaun McGrath said the spill was a "disaster." Dave Ostrander, EPA Region 8 Director of Emergency Preparedness, Assessment and Emergency Response, said it is a "huge tragedy."

"First off," Ostrander said, "I'd like to say I'm very sorry for what's happened."

Dan Schwartz covers government for The Daily Times. He can be reached at 505-564-4606.

Noel Lynn Smith and Hannah Grover contributed to this report.

## Navajo Nation, San Juan County officials continue to handle toxic waste plume

By Joshua Kellogg *The Daily Times*

Updated: 08/09/2015 11:16:47 PM MDT

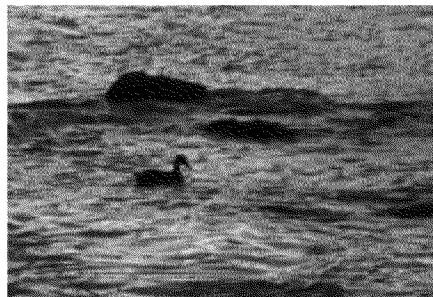
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FARMINGTON — Officials with the Navajo Nation, San Juan County and the state of New Mexico are trying to keep residents informed about the Animas River after an estimated 3 million gallons of contaminated water was released from the Gold King Mine north of Silverton, Colo.

The plume of toxic waste passed through San Juan County on Saturday, heading west. It was expected to hit the Colorado-Utah border at about 5 a.m. Monday, according to estimates from the San Juan County Geographical Information Systems department.

Supervisor Evan O'Keefe said he estimated the plume was about 45 miles west of Farmington and about 13 miles south of the New Mexico-Colorado border at about 9 p.m. Sunday.



*A duck swims Sunday along the Animas River at Berg Park in Farmington. The plume of contaminated water passed through San Juan County on Saturday.*

Throughout San Juan County, access to the Animas River is still closed, said County Executive Officer Kim Carpenter on Sunday afternoon. Officials advise residents with wells in the floodplains of the Animas River and the San Juan River downstream of the confluence of the two rivers to have their water tested before using it for cooking, drinking or bathing.

Carpenter said the biggest obstacle is providing drinking water for residents and livestock.

People and their pets should avoid contact with the river, livestock should not be allowed to drink the water and people should not catch fish in the river. Carpenter also instructed people to avoid contact with wildlife along the river in Berg Park.

Local officials — as well as representatives from the San Juan County Office of Emergency

Management, the Environmental Protection Agency and the New Mexico Environment Department — will host daily meetings to update the public on the river. The meetings will be at 6 p.m. Monday through Friday at the Farmington Civic Center, 200 W. Arrington St.

"We hope (Monday) to have some pretty good data we can share," Carpenter said. "That's what we are working on now."

Carpenter also voiced frustration about the delay in getting information about the chemicals in the water. The data, he said, will "give us a big picture of what we are going to deal with and the long-term effects we will have to deal with."

Also on Sunday afternoon, the Navajo Nation Commission on Emergency Management declared a state of emergency in response to the contamination. The declaration went before Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye for approval, said Rick Abasta, spokesman for the president. Begaye had not signed the declaration as of 10 p.m., Abasta said.

The declaration allows using tribal resources for an incident command center in the Shiprock Chapter.



*Valley Fire Department Capt. Zachary Trujillo talks about providing potable water on Sunday at the Valley Fire Department Station No. 4 in Kirtland.*

On Sunday evening, Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez attended a public meeting in Durango, Colo., after touring the Gold King Mine site.

Begaye told attendees his office will be aggressive in "putting (the EPA's) feet to the fire."

Nez said he felt like crying when he saw the mustard-yellow water stain in the river.

"Water in our region is very important," he said. "It doesn't matter if you are Navajo, if you are Hispanic, if you are

Anglo. We are all part of this river basin. Now, we are looking upon the EPA with frustration."

Nez said the pollution will affect farming, drinking water and livestock on the Navajo Nation.

"A lot of livestock utilize the water," he said. "What are we supposed to do? Stand guard 24 hours to keep our livestock from drinking the water?"

The Shiprock Chapter on Sunday evening voted on three resolutions related to the contaminated water, said Shiprock Chapter President Duane "Chilli" Yazzie in a phone interview. Yazzie said the resolutions approve the declaration of emergency, request "urgent action" before the United Nations and thank tribal leaders and the incident command team.

Yazzie added that the incident command team has been helping residents and livestock along

the San Juan River and has set up locations for people to fill water tanks.

"One of the biggest concerns we have, you can't very well manage livestock that are used to going to the river," Yazzie said.

He also expressed concern about tribal farmers and access to irrigation water.

"We're resigned to the fact that we will not get any irrigation water through our systems for the rest of the season," Yazzie said. "We're just accepting the fact that we have to face losing our crops. That is totally devastating to many, many families. It's very heartbreakin."

On Sunday morning, people walking the trails at Farmington's Berg Park echoed those sentiments, saying the contamination of the water was sad and disappointing.

Farmington resident Elton Daniels said he felt hopeless when he looked at the river after seeing photographs of it.

"I think it's going to have a damaging effect on the water we use," he said.

Officials have set up several potable water stations throughout the county for residents and RV and livestock owners to use.

Owners of RVs and livestock can fill their tanks at 201 W. Chaco St. in Aztec, next to City Hall and the Aztec Police Department. Residents need to bring their own containers and are asked to keep tanks to 100 gallons or less.

Valley Fire Department Capt. Zachary Trujillo said that on Sunday he answered questions from concerned residents about where to go if they run out of water, but no one filled containers on Saturday or Sunday.

"We might have a few more people as the week progresses on and we get the word out throughout the community," Trujillo said.

Officials at Farmington Fire Station No. 6 also said no one showed up to the water station on Sunday.

New Mexico Environment Department spokeswoman Allison Scott-Majure said water testing has not yet been performed in San Juan County. The department will provide free water testing from 10 a.m. to noon Monday at the San Juan County Sheriff's Office substation in Lee Acres, 21 County Road 5500 in Farmington.

The shower facilities at the McGee Park Convention Center and National Guard Armory in Farmington will open at 9 a.m. Monday. To use the McGee Park shower facilities, stop by the sheriff's office substation and ask for a shower pass.

## POTABLE WATER STATIONS

- Bloomfield Fire Station, 911 N. First St. Open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday.

- Farmington Fire Station No. 6, 3101 W. Main St. Open from 6 to 7 p.m. Monday throughout Friday.
- Sycamore Park Community Center, 1051 Sycamore St., Farmington. Open from 6 to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.
- Center Point Fire Station No. 1, 16 County Road 2755. Open 6 to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.
- Flora Vista Fire Station No. 1, 2 County Road 3275. Open 6 to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.
- Valley Fire Station No. 4, 4 County Road 6200. Open 6 to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.

*Joshua Kellogg covers education for The Daily Times. He can be reached at 505-564-4627 and jkellogg@daily-times.com. Follow him @jkelloggdt on Twitter.*

# Navajos plan to sue EPA over river cleanup

Patrick Lohmann / Journal Staff Writer

The president of the Navajo Nation said Sunday that he intends to sue for “every dollar it spends cleaning up this mess” after Environmental Protection Agency employees accidentally released at least 3 million gallons of wastewater, including potentially harmful metals, into a river that breached the sovereign nation’s borders this weekend.

The orange plume of wastewater, which slowly crawled down the San Juan River after gushing out of a Colorado mine on Friday, has already forced many reservation residents in New Mexico and Utah to cease watering their crops and livestock, shut down at least two drinking water wells and required them to avoid the river entirely, said Rick Abasta, communications director for Navajo tribal leadership.

The nation on Sunday also took steps to formally declare a state of emergency for the reservation, warning of potential environmental and other damage. The declaration was waiting for the president’s signature as of Sunday evening.

“The EPA was right in the middle of the disaster and we intend to make sure the Navajo Nation recovers every dollar it spends cleaning up this mess and every dollar it loses as a result of injuries to our precious Navajo natural resources,” president Russell Begaye said in a news release. “I have instructed Navajo Nation Department of Justice to take immediate action against the EPA to the fullest extent of the law to protect Navajo families and resources,” he added.

New Mexico officials said the plume was beginning to dissipate, and preliminary data released by the EPA on Sunday showed that the levels of metal at various checkpoints along the Animas river in Colorado, including arsenic and lead, diminished within several hours.

However, state environment department officials said Sunday that they still need much more information and were only beginning to examine the data.

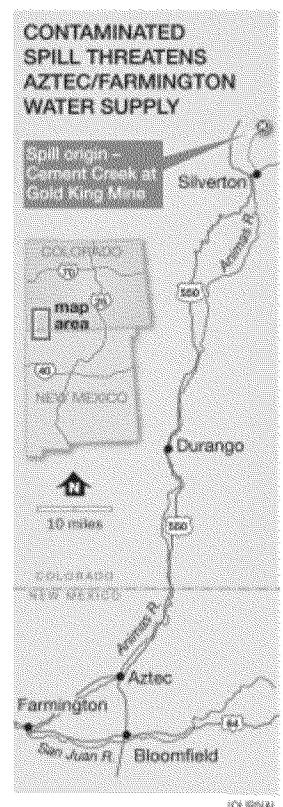
Also, federal and state officials said Sunday that a major potential problem could be the potentially hazardous sediment that sinks to the bottom of the river as the plume passes and that could be kicked up again in flooding or weather events.

An Environmental Protection Agency official said Sunday she doesn’t believe wildlife will suffer significant health impacts from the large volume of wastewater that spilled from an abandoned mine in southwestern Colorado.

The EPA also said Sunday that the amount of wastewater that spilled from Colorado’s Gold King Mine into the Animas River is three times larger than its initial estimate. The agency says 3 million gallons spilled into the river Wednesday and Thursday, instead of 1 million. The revision came after the EPA used a stream gauge from the U.S. Geological Survey.

EPA toxicologist Deborah McKean says the sludge laced with heavy metals moved so quickly after the spill that it would not have harmed animals that consumed it.

The EPA still doesn’t know if there are any health risks posed to people or aquatic life.



Trais Kliphuis, water protection division director for the State Environment Department, said New Mexico officials have been concerned with what they said was a slow rollout of information and unclear leadership in charge of coordinating the response.

She said the department will have employees outside the San Juan County fair providing information about the plume and has created a list of all the wells within 1.5 miles on either side of the river. Employees will also go door to door, environment officials said, to offer to sample wells in or around the river's floodplain.

The wastewater spilled from the Gold King Mine on Friday when an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine. The mine had been inactive since 1923. The EPA's stated intention was to assess the on-going wastewater releases from the mine, to treat the water and to consider the feasibility of continued treatment for the Gold King Mine and others nearby that contain similar reservoirs of wastewater.

Kliphus said the state environment department was aware that some of the wastewater was trickling out of the mines in Colorado but that a deluge of this sort was impossible to predict.

"We were aware that there was a trickling, that there was some interesting hydrogeology going on there," she said. "... But nobody could have predicted this. It was unprecedented."

The plume reached the northern New Mexico cities of Aztec on Friday night, Farmington on Saturday morning and Kirtland on Saturday afternoon. The plume has been visually diluted and the leading edge of it is far less defined.

No health hazard has been detected yet. In addition to lead and arsenic, federal officials say the spill contains cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, and results are expected to be found early this week. The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell.

At least two of the heavy metals, lead and arsenic, found in the waste water can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

# Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

Associated Press 8:25 a.m. EDT August 10, 2015



(Photo: Alexa Rogals, AP)

Mustard-colored wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain into a river from an abandoned mine in southwestern Colorado at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which caused the spill.

The rate of discharge Saturday was down from about 740 gallons per minute on Friday. But three days after the massive spill, the agency said it still didn't know what the possible environmental and health impacts are.

The agency said it hoped to have a thorough lab analysis of the contaminants — which include lead and arsenic — as soon as Sunday morning.

"We're busting our tails to get that out," Environmental Protection Agency Regional Director Shaun McGrath said. "We know the importance to people to have this information."

In the meantime, the EPA said it had finished building two containment ponds to treat the yellow sludge. However, the ponds are meant to immediately address the spill and cleanup efforts will likely take a long time. McGrath could not say whether that means days or weeks.

"This is a long-term impact. The sediment, the metals that are in that sediment are going to settle out to the stream bottom," he said. "As we have storm surges, as we have flooding events, that sediment can and likely will get kicked back up into the water. We're going to have to do ongoing monitoring."

About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

The plume reached the northern New Mexico cities of Aztec on Friday night, Farmington on Saturday morning and Kirtland on Saturday afternoon. The plume has been visually diluted and the leading edge of it is far less defined. The water is reported to be muddy with an orange tinge rather than solid orange.

Local government officials in New Mexico and Colorado have blasted the EPA, saying they didn't alert communities soon after the spill and that answers have been slow in coming.

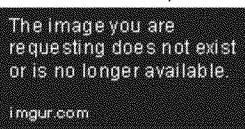
"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away (from the river) and keep testing. We still don't know how bad it is," San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper said.

Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water sources to draw from.

No health hazard has been detected yet. In addition to lead and arsenic, federal officials say the spill contains cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, but no results have been released.

In addition to New Mexico, wastewater from the mine was also inching toward Utah.



The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell.

Officials said the contamination would likely settle into sediment in Lake Powell. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials said visitors will be warned starting Monday to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the lake and river until further notice.

The spill from the mine flowed down Cement Creek and into the scenic Animas River, which is popular with boaters and anglers. Aerial photos showed the slow-moving yellow water snaking by scenic mountain roads surrounded by pine trees.

While awaiting further results on the concentration levels of the metals in the water, the EPA released results Saturday showing how acidic the water became after the spill.

In Cement Creek, near the spill, the water registered a pH level of 3.74, which the EPA said is similar to the acidity of tomato juice and apples. Further downstream, in Silverton, pH levels were found to be about 4.8, which is similar to liquid black coffee.

The EPA warned people to stay out of the river and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it. Local officials declared stretches of the river off-limits in Colorado and New Mexico.

At least two of the heavy metals found in the waste water can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure. Arsenic at high levels can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer. Lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems for adults, harm development in fetuses and lead to kidney disease, developmental problems and sometimes death in children, the EPA said.

When the spill happened, the EPA-supervised crew was trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.

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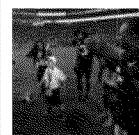


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# EPA spill: 'The magnitude of it, you can't even describe it'

By Dana Ford, CNN

① Updated 6:30 AM ET, Mon August 10, 2015



Source: KRQE

**EPA accidentally turns river orange** 01:53

## Story highlights

The city of Durango and La Plata County, Colorado, declare a state of emergency

**(CNN)**—The city of Durango and La Plata County, Colorado, have declared a state of emergency after a federal cleanup crew accidentally released mine waste into the water.

An estimated 1 million gallons of waste water

"This action has been taken due to the serious nature of the incident," says La Plata County Manager Joe Kerby

spilled out of an abandoned mine area in the southern part of the state last week, turning the Animas River orange and prompting the Environmental Protection Agency to tell locals to

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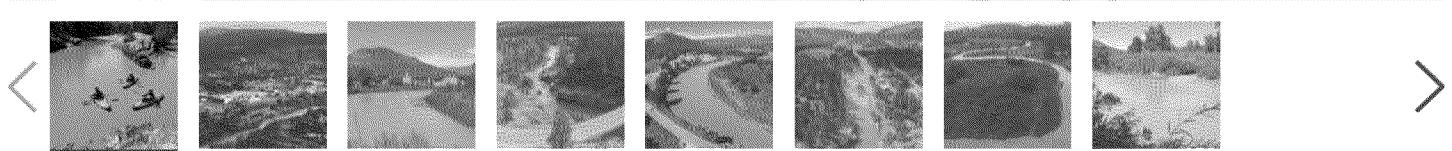
federal resources are brought to bear to assist our community not only in actively managing this tragic incident but also to recover from it," said La Plata County Manager Joe Kerby.

According to the EPA, the spill occurred when one of its teams was using heavy equipment to enter the Gold King Mine, a suspended mine near Durango. Instead of entering the mine and beginning the process of pumping and treating the contaminated water inside as planned, the team accidentally caused it to flow into the nearby Animas River. Before the spill, water carrying "metals pollution" was flowing into a holding area outside the mine.



EPA turns river orange 8 photos

Kayakers float along the Animas River near Durango, Colorado, on Thursday, August 6, in water colored from a mine waste spill



Colorado Parks and Wildlife officials have been watching for any effects on wildlife since the incident began on Wednesday. They are optimistic that the effects of the spill on terrestrial wildlife will be minimal, the EPA said. Fish are more sensitive to changes in water.

Officials said they believe the spill carried heavy metals, mainly iron, zinc and copper, from the mine into a creek that feeds into the Animas River. From there, the orange water plugged steadily along through the small stretch of winding river in southern Colorado and across the state border to New Mexico where the Animas meets the San Juan River.

New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez was in Farmington over the weekend to tour the damage.

"The magnitude of it, you can't even describe it," she said, CNN affiliate KRQE reported. "It's like when I flew over the fires, your mind sees something it's not ready or adjusted to see."

The affiliate spoke to Rosemary Hart, who lives on the Animas River. Her family reportedly depends on a well to get water, and the spill has made the water unusable.

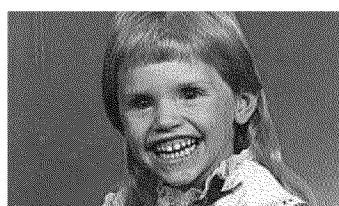
"We came out here together, and we looked at the river and we cried," Hart told KRQE.

The EPA and the New Mexico Environment Department said they will test private domestic wells near the Animas to identify metals of concern from the spill.

Tests on public drinking water systems are conducted separately by the state environment department, the agencies said.

*CNN's Eli Watkins, Jackie Castillo, Jethro Mullen and Joe Sutton contributed to this report.*

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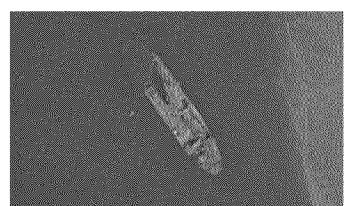
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# Toxic sludge in contaminated river reaches New Mexico, communities have 90-day water supply

Published time: 9 Aug, 2015 09:07

Edited time: 10 Aug, 2015 10:20



© Ruptly / Ruptly

Toxic waste, including arsenic and lead, which seeped into a river in

southwest Colorado, has now crossed the state border into New Mexico. More than 550 gallons per minute are entering the water flow system according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which caused the spill.

The agency says it should have the results of samples undergoing lab testing soon, so they can find out just how contaminated the river has become. Aside from lead and arsenic, federal officials say the spill also contains, cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium.

Orange Animas River in Colorado after EPA spills 1mn gallons waste



High levels of arsenic can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer, while lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems in adults and can be fatal for children.

*"We're busting our tails to get that out,"* Environmental Protection Agency Regional Director Shaun McGrath said, as cited by AP. *"We know the importance to people to have this information."*

## **READ MORE: EPA spills 1 mln gallons mine waste, turns river in Colorado orange**

The bright orange toxic sludge, which entered the Animas River in Colorado, has now crossed the state border into New Mexico and reached the city of Aztec on Friday night. Local communities in both states are not happy and have blasted the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for being slow in

warning residents after the spill took place.

*"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away (from the river) and keep testing. We still don't know how bad it is,"* San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper said, according to AP.



**Anonymous**  
@YourAnonNews

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Durango, Colorado: EPA's Animas River mine disaster. Before & after :

12:00 AM - 9 Aug 2015

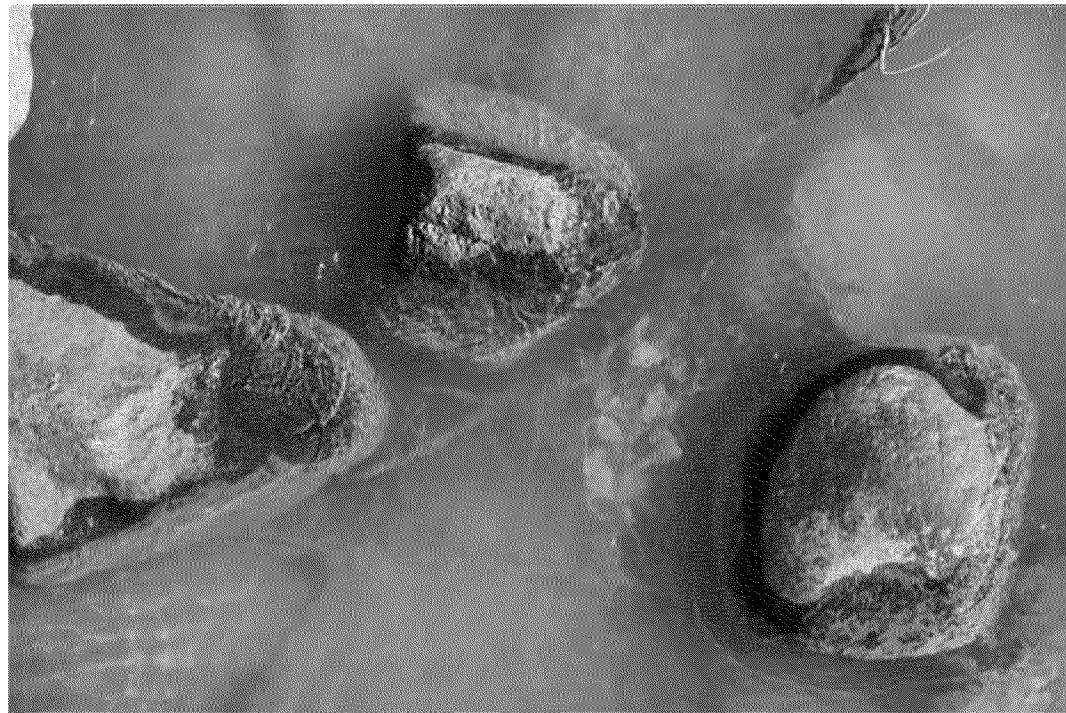
449      200

Officials in the cities of Aztec and Farmington say they have shut down the river's access to water treatment plants, adding that the communities had a 90-day supply of water.

The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell. There are also reports that the contaminated water is heading towards Utah.

The EPA says they have finished building two containment ponds, which are aimed at treating the toxic sludge in the river. However, this is very much a short-term plan, while the long-term issue of cleaning up the spill will take some time according to McGrath.

*"The sediment, the metals that are in that sediment are going to settle out to the stream bottom," he said. "As we have storm surges, as we have flooding events, that sediment can and likely will get kicked back up into the water. We're going to have to do ongoing monitoring,"* McGrath added.



DH DurangoHerald  
@DurangoHerald

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A look at the bottom of the Animas River on Saturday sure looks allot different than it did a few days ago.

11:33 PM - 8 Aug 2015

21 9

It is estimated that over one million gallons of toxic waste has already found its way into the river. The spill was caused after the EPA was investigating the abandoned Gold King Mine on Wednesday together with the state Division of

Reclamation, Mining and Safety. They accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine and this triggered the release of the waste into Cement Creek, a tributary of the Animas River in San Juan County.

Ironically, the initial goal was to find a safe way to pump out the wastewater from the mine, which was abandoned in 1923 and treat it, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.

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## DENVER AND THE WEST

### New Mexico officials offer to test well water in Animas River spill's wake

The New Mexico Environment Department says it is asking for federal aid

By Jesse Paul

*The Denver Post* (<mailto:jpaul@denverpost.com?subject=The%20Denver%20Post>:)

POSTED: 08/10/2015 09:02:55 AM MDT

UPDATE: 08/10/2015 09:04:19 AM MDT ([www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_28614725/new-mexico-officials-offer-test-well-water-animas#id](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_28614725/new-mexico-officials-offer-test-well-water-animas#id))



1/5

A spill that sent 1 million gallons of wastewater from an abandoned mine into the Animas River, turning the river orange, set off warnings Thursday that contaminants threaten water quality for those downstream. (Brent Lewis, The Denver Post)

New Mexico environmental officials are offering to test private domestic wells in the wake of a [three-million gallon spill](#)

([http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_28612228/la-plata-and-durango-declare-emergency-sludge-flows](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_28612228/la-plata-and-durango-declare-emergency-sludge-flows)) last week in southwest Colorado of mine wastewater into the Animas River.

The New Mexico Environment Department on Sunday night said the testing will identify metals of concern

([http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci\\_28607200/animas-river-tests-show-water-acidic-coffee?source=pkg](http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_28607200/animas-river-tests-show-water-acidic-coffee?source=pkg)) in relation to the spill and general well water quality.

"We are mobilizing a team of scientists, engineers and technical specialists, in concert with the Environmental Protection Agency, to staff a station outside the San Juan County Fair that can provide free well water testing for domestic wells all week long," Ryan Flynn, the department's secretary, said in a statement.

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[Monks Park is filled with transients and drug users. Now the city wants fixes](#)  
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Water in the Animas River still has traces

C.R. 252 shortly before 1 p.m., Thursday,

August 6, 2015. (Photo courtesy

*Magelight Media*)

[Judge: Steak 'n Shake franchise owners violated agreement, must pay up](#)  
([http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci\\_2856811/judge-steak-n-shake-franchise-owners-violated-agreement-must-pay-up](http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci_2856811/judge-steak-n-shake-franchise-owners-violated-agreement-must-pay-up))

Aug 10:

- Experts estimate [55,000 people](#) live near toxic mine sites in West



# The New York Times

<http://nyti.ms/1lyqa2O>

U.S.

## Anger Rises as E.P.A. Increases Estimate of Toxic Water Spill at Colorado Mine

By JULIE TURKEWITZ AUG. 10, 2015

DURANGO, Colo. — Anger over a spill of toxic water from a mine that turned this community's river into a yellow-orange ribbon rose on Sunday when the Environmental Protection Agency announced that the spill was three times larger than previously stated — and that the agency was still unsure if the polluted water posed a health threat to humans or animals.

The agency, typically charged with responding to toxic disasters, has claimed responsibility for the spill, which unleashed a chemical brew that caused levels of arsenic, lead and other metals to spike in the Animas River, a tributary that plays a vital role in the culture and economy in this patch of southwestern Colorado.

Agency officials said on Sunday that the size of the spill was larger than originally estimated: more than three million gallons rather than one million.

La Plata County and the City of Durango have declared states of emergency, and the county estimates that about 1,000 residential water wells could be contaminated. The river is closed indefinitely, and the La Plata sheriff has hastily recast his campaign signs into posters warning river visitors to stay out of the water.

The yellow plume has traveled down to New Mexico, where it is being tracked, but it is starting to dissipate, officials said.

On Sunday night, residents packed a school auditorium in Durango for a meeting with the agency's regional director, Shaun McGrath. During a public comment session that lasted more than two hours, residents flouted a sign on the wall that instructed the auditorium's typical patrons — middle schoolers — to refrain from calling out, jumping up or insulting others during assemblies.

Shouts rang out. A few people cried. One resident questioned whether the agency had refashioned itself into the "Environmental Pollution Agency." Others demanded to know what would happen to wildlife, livestock, water wells, sediment and river-based jobs.

"When — when can we be open again?" said David Moler, 35, the owner of a river-rafting company who had approached a microphone. "All I hear is a handful of 'gonna-dos,'" he added. "What should I tell my employees?"

Mr. McGrath and his colleagues urged patience and assured residents that they would provide information about health risks once they had it. The agency, he said, is awaiting test results to determine whether the water poses a risk.

"We're going to continue to work until this is cleaned up," Mr. McGrath said, "and hold ourselves to the same standards that we would anyone that would have created this situation."

On Aug. 5, a team from the Environmental Protection Agency was investigating an abandoned mine about 50 miles north of here. Called the Gold King, it was last active in the 1920s, but it had been leaking toxic water at a rate of 50 to 250 gallons a minute for years. It is owned by a group called the San Juan Corporation.

A call to the company's lawyer was not returned.

The agency had planned to find the source of the leak in the hope of one day stanching it. Instead, as workers used machinery to hack at loose material, a surprise deluge of orange water ripped through, spilling into Cement Creek and flowing into the Animas. The burst did not injure workers.

The next day, as the neon water slid into Durango, masses of community members watched from the riverbanks. Some called it a painful procession: The Animas River is considered the cultural soul of this region, a sort of moving Main Street that hosts multiple floating parades a year and is typically bustling with rafters and kayakers.

Children study the river. Sweethearts marry on its banks. Its former name, given by Spaniards, is Río de las Ánimas, coincidentally, "River of Souls."

On Sunday, State Senator Ellen Roberts, a Republican who lives near the river, cried softly as she considered the pollution, adding that she had dropped her father's ashes in its depths.

"It is not just a scenic destination," Ms. Roberts said. "It is where people literally raise their children. It is where the farmers and ranchers feed their livestock, which in turn feeds the people. We're isolated from Denver through the mountains. And we are pretty resourceful people. But if you take away our water supply, we're left with virtually no way to move forward."

There are about 200 abandoned mines in the Animas watershed, the last of which closed in the early 1990s. Colorado has about 23,000 abandoned mines; the United States has an estimated 500,000. Since the 1870s, metal mining has both enriched and poisoned this region, turning the earth under portions of southwest Colorado into a maze of tunnels and leaving behind shuttered sites oozing with chemicals.

The Animas region is distinct in that it has an organization called the Animas River Stakeholders Group, a loose coalition of mining companies; environmental groups; property owners; and local, state and federal government entities that have worked together since 1994 to clean up some of these sites.

In recent years, the group had identified the Gold King as one of the two most polluted mine sites, and some have pushed to figure out the sources of its chemical bleed, believing that a cleanup was necessary. The Environmental Protection Agency was moving ahead with that project — without its partners — when the spill occurred.

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# EPA Says It Released 3 Million Gallons Of Contaminated Water Into River

AUGUST 10, 2015 8:42 AM ET

BILL CHAPPELL



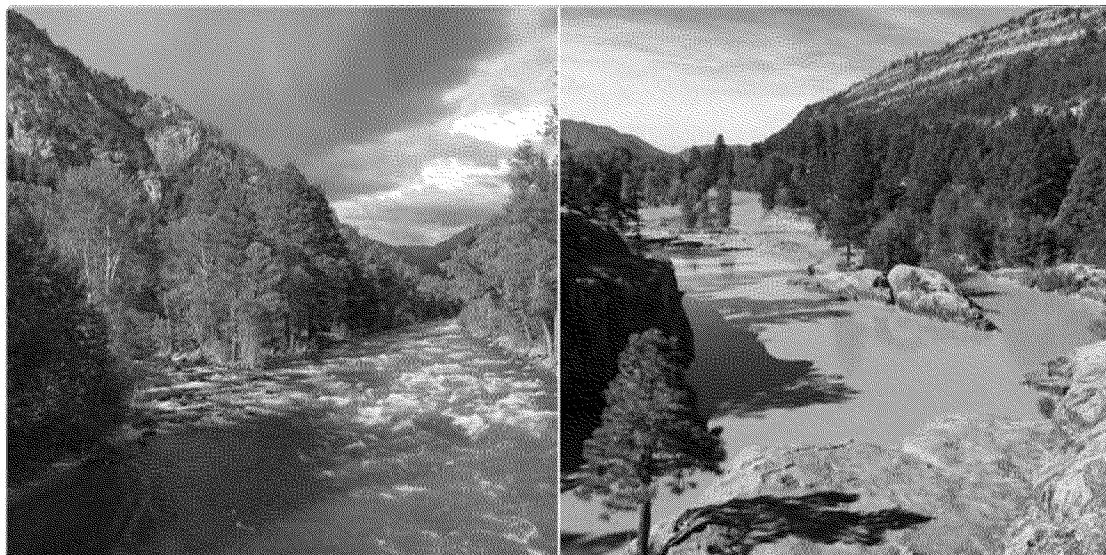
Contaminated wastewater is seen at the entrance to the Gold King Mine in San Juan County, Colo., in this picture released by the Environmental Protection Agency. The photo was taken Wednesday; the plume of contaminated water has continued to work its way downstream.

*Reuters /Landov*

In an event that has led to health warnings and turned a river orange, the Environmental Protection Agency says one of its safety teams accidentally released

contaminated water from a mine into the Animas River in southwest Colorado.

The spill, which sent heavy metals, arsenic and other contaminants into a waterway that flows into the San Juan National Forest, occurred Wednesday. The EPA initially said 1 million gallons of wastewater had been released, but that figure has risen sharply.



**Luke Runyon**  
@LukeRunyon

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Las Animas river last month at Purgatory Creek. And the river now, contaminated w/ mine waste: [durangoherald.com/article/201508...](http://durangoherald.com/article/201508...)

11:45 AM - 6 Aug 2015

77      12

From member station KUNC, Stephanie Paige Ogburn reports for our Newscast unit:

"The EPA now estimates 3 million gallons of wastewater spilled from the mine into the Animas River. They also confirmed lead concentrations had spiked over 3,500 times historic levels just above the town of Durango.

"Debra McKean, a toxicologist with the agency, says levels peak and then decrease as the contamination flows downriver.

" 'Yes, those numbers are high and they are scary because they seem so high,' she said,

'especially compared to the baseline numbers.'

"New test results show significant increases in arsenic levels, and some mercury has been detected. Durango and La Plata County have declared a state of emergency."

Officials are warning residents, farmers and outdoor enthusiasts to avoid the water. The spill occurred at Cement Creek, releasing contaminants that will eventually make their way downstream toward New Mexico and Utah, in a river system that links to the Colorado River and Arizona.

After waiting a day to reveal the incident, the EPA has been criticized by those who say it didn't announce the accident soon enough. EPA officials say it took time to realize the magnitude of the spill.

The EPA team had been working on the Gold King Mine near Silverton, an area that has many disused mines.

KUNC reports, "Scientists say it's the largest untreated mine drainage in the state, and problematic concentrations of zinc, copper, cadmium, iron, lead, manganese and aluminum are choking off the Upper Animas River's ecosystem."

The station also explains how the mines became sources of contaminated water:

"For most of the West's history, miners were basically allowed to run willy-nilly across the landscape, burrowing for gold, silver or other valuable minerals. According to Ronald Cohen, an environmental engineer at the Colorado School of Mines, whenever you dig into a mountain, 'at some point you are going to hit water.'

"That water, when it runs through the rocks in a mine, hits a mineral called pyrite, or iron sulfide. It reacts with air and pyrite to form sulfuric acid and dissolved iron. That acid then continues through the mine, dissolving other heavy metals, like copper and lead. Eventually, you end up with water that's got high levels of a lot of undesirable materials in it."

Reporting on how the breach occurred, Colorado Public Radio says that an EPA team

used heavy equipment to dig into a dam at the Gold King Mine site, hoping to install a drain pipe. But because of the volume of water and the dam's makeup of soil and not rock, it spewed zinc, iron and contaminants into a runoff channel that leads to the nearby creek.

mining    colorado

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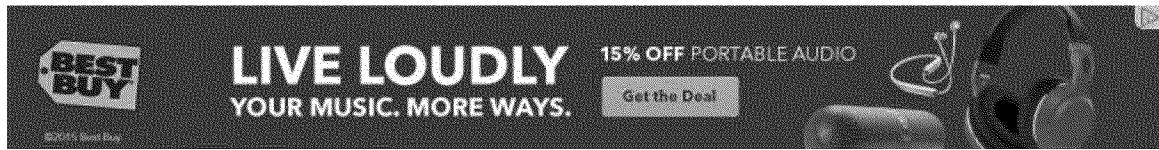
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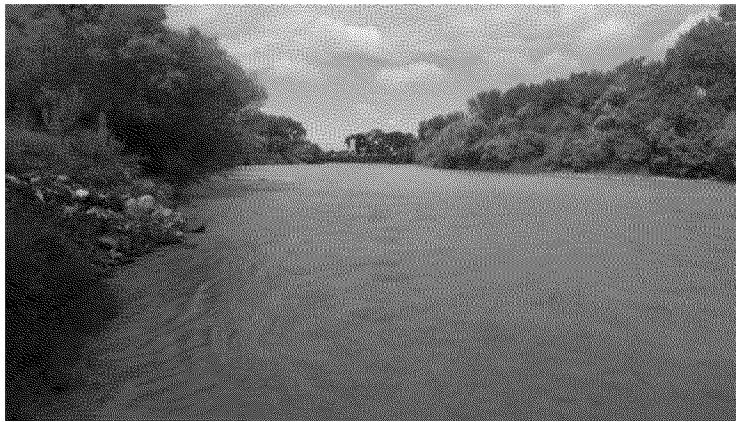
# The EPA Caused A Huge Toxic Spill Now Streaming Toward Lake Powell

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Forbes ([/](#))



*The Animas River at Farmington, N.M. on August 8 (Credit: Eric Mack)*

Farmington, N.M. — The waters of the Animas River flowed a bright carrot orange past the Riverside Nature Center in Farmington Saturday morning where an electronic sign in the parking lot flashed the unusual news: "RIVER CLOSED." An equally steady stream of curious citizens parked just beyond the sign to make the quick walk to the riverbank and snap a picture of the fouled river with their phones.

"It's just sad," said one woman standing on the bank while others shouted and strained to keep intrigued dogs and children away from the water.

A toxic plume of one million gallons of untreated wastewater accidentally released by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) workers from a closed mine upriver in Silverton, Colorado last Wednesday is to blame for the Animas' dramatically different hue from its normal color. Ordinarily, this river runs with deep blue and green waters, the type of which could be still be observed in the adjacent waters of the San Juan River upstream of the point just outside town where the Animas empties into it.

Beyond Farmington, the San Juan flows into Utah where it joins the Colorado River at Lake Powell, itself not far upstream from the Grand Canyon in Arizona.



*A sample of the contaminated water (Credit:Eric Mack)*

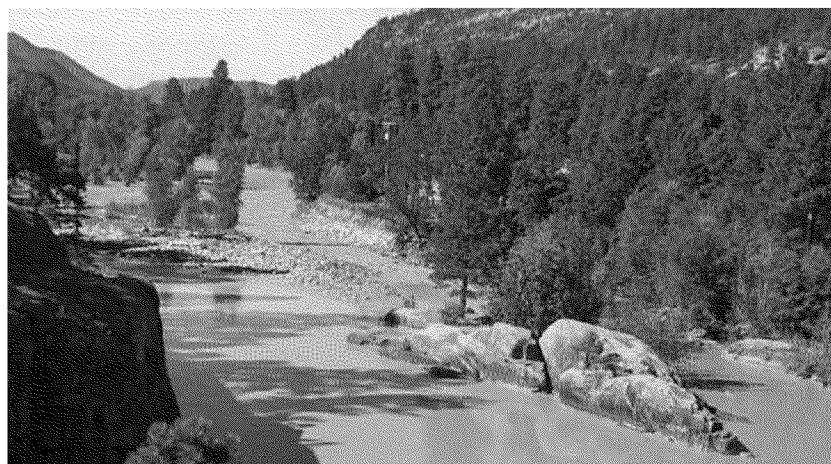
By Saturday afternoon, the Animas was still emptying unknown amounts of heavy metals, perhaps including lead, arsenic, cadmium, aluminum and others into the San Juan, while a crowd of hundreds gathered in the Farmington Civic Center directed another kind of emotional reaction at Mark Hayes, who had the unenviable distinction of being the only person on stage at an emergency public meeting employed by the EPA.

“This is bull shit!” shouted more than one angry member of the audience on multiple occasions during the forum, but the comment was almost always directed at Hayes, who responded compassionately and empathetically, but with frustratingly little in terms of specifics, even referring the crowd to the agency web site for more information at one point.



# Officials pledge to ‘make the EPA pay’ for Animas River spill

By Heath Haussamen | 15 hours ago



*La Plata County / Courtesy photo*

A scene from the Animas River in La Plata County, Colo., after last week’s spill.

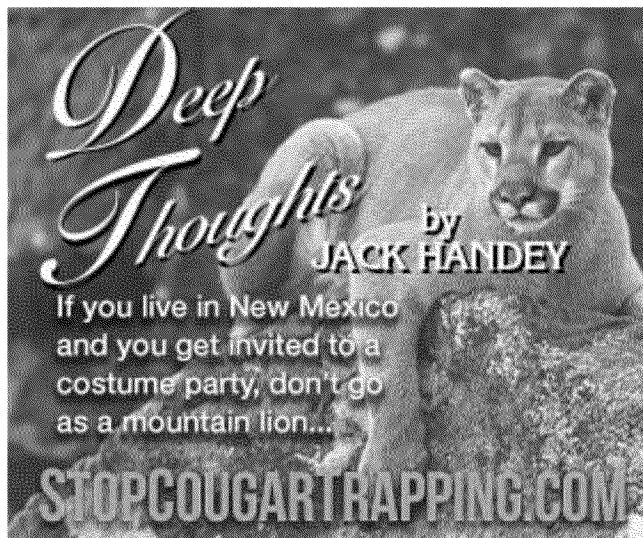
Government officials from New Mexico and the Navajo Nation were among those working through the weekend to try to understand and respond to the Environmental Protection Agency’s inadvertent triggering of the spill of an estimated **3 million gallons** (<http://www.durangoherald.com/article/20150809/NEWS01/150809594/3-million-not-1-million-gallons-of-contaminated-water-rushed-from-mine-EPA-says>) of toxic waste into the Animas River last week.

**Wired** (<http://www.wired.com/2015/08/epa-accidentally-turned-river-toxic-and-orange/>) has a succinct summary of how we got here:

It’s a classic case of good intentions backfiring. The abandoned mines in the area have long been a problem, filling up with acidic wastewater that leaches heavy metals out of rock and leaks into the river—a slow-motion environmental debacle. And the EPA has been **trying to designate the mines a Superfund site** (<http://www.kunc.org/post/why-was-environmental-protection-agency-messing-mine-above-silverton#stream/0> <http://www.kunc.org/post/why-was-environmental-protection-agency-messing-mine-above-silverton>) for years, only to come up against local resistance. The mines still aren’t on the Superfund list, but the EPA has been trying to them clean up anyway. That’s why a crew was digging around the Gold King Mine — they starting to investigate leaks when the mine’s plug blew, turning the slow-motion problem into a fast-moving, highly visible advertisement for fixing the problem. “It’s hard being on the other side of this,” said Dave Ostrander, the regional EPA director of emergency preparedness, at a public meeting on Friday afternoon. “We typically respond to emergencies; we don’t cause them.”

The spill occurred along the **Animas River** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animas\\_River](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animas_River)) in Southwestern Colorado, which flows through Northwestern New Mexico near Aztec and into the San Juan River. The water then flows through the Navajo Nation as part of the Colorado River system that provides water to much of Arizona and Southern California.

Officials in New Mexico and the Navajo Nation have urged people to stay away from the rivers while the contamination flows through. Both governments are conducting their own tests to determine the severity of the disaster.



(<http://www.nmpolitics.net/index/sponsored-content-game-fishes-proposal-is-a-war-on-cougars/>)

N.M. Gov. Susana Martinez said the EPA failed to notify the state about the spill for 24 hours. State officials are highly critical of the federal agency.

"We will not allow EPA to leave until they have compensated us," N.M. Environment Department Cabinet Secretary Ryan Flynn said during a town hall meeting, according to the **Farmington Daily Times** ([http://www.dailystimes.com/four\\_corners-news/ci\\_28608042/new-mexico-plans-sue-epa-over-mine-spill](http://www.dailystimes.com/four_corners-news/ci_28608042/new-mexico-plans-sue-epa-over-mine-spill)).

New Mexico's congressman representing that area, Democrat Ben Ray Luján, also criticized the EPA's response during a weekend meeting, according to the newspaper.

"There's a lot of questions that our constituents have, and so many communities have as well, that we need to get rapid responses to," the Daily Times quoted him as saying.

Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye announced Sunday that the Navajo Nation was making cleanup plans and preparing lawsuits against the Gold King Mine, where the spill occurred, and the EPA.

"We are going to be suing for millions, billions of dollars," the **Navajo Times** (<http://navajotimes.com/reznews/begaye-to-sue-gold-king-mine-and-epa/#.VcfYkZ1Vikp>) quoted Begaye as saying. "...We are going to make EPA pay for this."

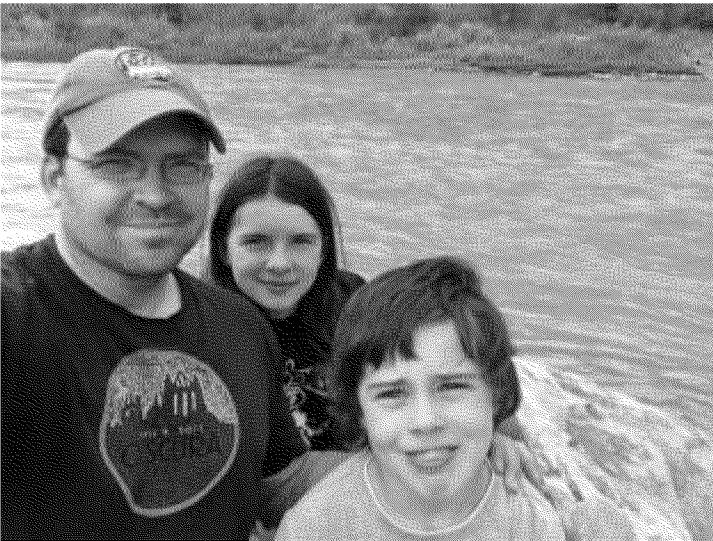
## 'Thank you EPA'

Though many said the mine shares blame for the pollution, much of the anger in a discussion NMPolitics.net facilitated on Facebook was aimed at the EPA.

"Thank you EPA," former state Rep. Kathy McCoy of Albuquerque **wrote** ([https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment\\_id=10100872787549041&offset=0&total\\_comments=21&comment\\_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D](https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment_id=10100872787549041&offset=0&total_comments=21&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D)). "If a private company had done this, they'd be jailed and fined within minutes."

"This is your crack government professionals at work," **wrote** ([https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment\\_id=10100873339398131&offset=0&total\\_comments=21&comment\\_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R5%22%7D](https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment_id=10100873339398131&offset=0&total_comments=21&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R5%22%7D)) Mike Johnson of Santa Fe.

Not all were quick to express anger. "The EPA now must be completely open and hide nothing," Michael Swickard of Las Cruces **wrote** ([https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment\\_id=10100872798362371&offset=0&total\\_comments=21&comment\\_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D](https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment_id=10100872798362371&offset=0&total_comments=21&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D)). "I'm not mad that an accident did happen, but if the EPA gives us attitude or they BS us, I will be angry."



Jim O'Donnell / Courtesy photo

Jim O'Donnell of Taos has been camping with his family in Colorado and took this photo alongside the polluted Animas River on Friday in Durango. "So sad. I've fished and rafted that river so much," he told NMPolitics.net.

([https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment\\_id=10100873032443271&offset=0&total\\_comments=21&comment\\_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R6%22%7D](https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment_id=10100873032443271&offset=0&total_comments=21&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R6%22%7D))

that her "biggest beef is the lack of timely information." She was worried about wildlife.

"We keep part of the property wild as sanctuary, and I've got turkeys and deer and raccoons and heaven only knows what else who drink out of that river," Anderson wrote.

Officials were scrambling, without solid information, to keep people and animals safe. Among Begaye's words to people on the Navajo Nation, according to the Navajo Times: Stay out of the San Juan River. Keep livestock from drinking the water. Avoid using the river water.

The Durango Herald on Sunday published an article about "**cause for optimism**

(<http://www.durangoherald.com/article/20150809/NEWS01/150809593/article/20150809/NEWS01/150809593/No-major-species-dieoffs-from-Animas-River-contamination-cause-for-optimism>) :" Days after the spill, there haven't been massive fish or insect die-offs.

## Effects 'will be felt for months'

Later Sunday the EPA **upped its estimate** (<http://www.durangoherald.com/article/20150809/NEWS01/150809594/3-million-not-1-million-gallons-of-contaminated-water-rushed-from-mine-EPA-says>) of the spill's size from 1 million gallons to 3 million. And one thing is certain, the Durango Herald reported in a **separate article** (<http://www.durangoherald.com/article/20150808/NEWS01/150809653/Action-to-deal-with-Animas-River-contamination-slow-moving>) :

The effects of the environmental disaster will be felt for months. The high-water mark left from the pulse of toxic waste deposited a yellow-orange film along large swaths of the Animas River. As the murky water traveled 50 miles from Silverton, it tumbled over rocks that kept it stirred. By the time it arrived in the Animas Valley near Dalton Ranch, the river slowed, which gave minerals a chance to settle on the riverbed. High-water run-off events are expected to stir those sediments and cloud the river during the weeks and months to come.

And from Wired:

<http://www.nmpolitics.net/index/2015/08/officials-pledge-to-make-the-epa-pay-for-animas-river-spill/>

Many joined the Martinez Administration in expressing frustration about the EPA's lack of information gathering and/or sharing about the spill.

Claudia Anderson of Farmington said the San Juan River runs along her property. She wrote **on Facebook**

The EPA is working to stop the flow into the river by building a retention pond next to the mine. But the contaminants already in the water? There's nothing to do — except wait for the muck to sink or dilute down. The Bureau of Reclamation is releasing more water from the Navajo Dam to **dilute the toxic metals** (<http://www.usbr.gov/newsroom/newsrelease/detail.cfm?RecordID=49968>). But spring runoff next year might stir up contaminants that have sunk to the river bottom all over again.

Carol Miller of Ojo Sarco **wrote on Facebook** ([https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment\\_id=10100872823601791&offset=0&total\\_comments=21&comment\\_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D](https://www.facebook.com/haussamen/posts/10100872757743771?comment_id=10100872823601791&offset=0&total_comments=21&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R9%22%7D)) that the spill is a symptom of a larger problem.

"The real cause of this was the company or companies that mined and profited from the ore and walked away from the mess, not even attempting remediation," she wrote. "The heavy metals sink to the bottom and the river and stream banks even as the contamination is diluted. Every time there are rains, snowmelt and/or high water the toxins will be re-suspended. This is a long-term disaster that isn't over when the river again runs clear."

## Video

Here's video from **the Durango Herald** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faTNIWP3qaE>) of the contamination flowing into the river:

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[CBS/AP](#) / August 10, 2015, 10:08 AM

# Residents on edge as toxic Colo. spill larger than first reported

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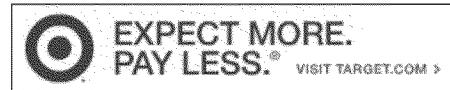
Last Updated Aug 10, 2015 10:52 AM EDT

**DENVER** -- The Environmental Protection Agency says the mine waste spill into Colorado waters is much larger than originally estimated.

But an EPA official said Sunday that she doesn't believe wildlife will suffer significant health impacts from the wastewater from an abandoned mine in southwestern Colorado.

The agency said the amount of heavy-metal laced water that leaked from the Gold King Mine into the Animas River, turning the water a mucky orange and then yellow, is three times larger than its initial estimate.

The EPA now says 3 million gallons of wastewater spilled Wednesday and Thursday, instead of 1 million. The revision came after the EPA used a stream gauge from the U.S. Geological Survey.



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People kayak in the Animas River near Durango, Colo., Aug. 6, 2015, in water colored from a mine waste spill. / **PRESS ASSOCIATION VIA AP IMAGES**

CBS Denver reports that Governor Hickenlooper is preparing a state of emergency for the areas in southwest Colorado along the Animas River. Both the town of Durango and La Plata County have already issued their own emergency orders.

The agency has so far been unable to determine whether humans or aquatic life face health risks. However, EPA toxicologist Deborah McKean said the sludge moved so quickly after the spill that it would not have "caused significant health effects" to animals that consumed the water.

The discolored water from the spill stretched more than 100 miles from where it originated near Colorado's historic mining town of Silverton into the New Mexico municipalities of Farmington, Aztec and Kirtland.

"I'm here on my property and I cannot shower, I cannot cook, I cannot do anything with the water from my water well," Farmington resident Rosemary Hart told CBS News correspondent Mireya Villarreal.



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### Toxic water taints river in Colorado

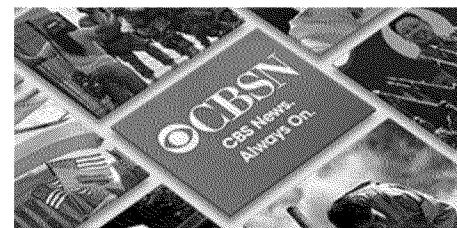
To keep water flowing to homes, the residential tank in Halchita has been filled with clean water hauled 40 miles from Arizona.

Back in Colorado where the spill started, the EPA planned to meet with residents of Durango, downstream from the mine. The EPA water tests near Durango are still being analyzed.

The EPA has not said how long cleanup efforts will take. An EPA-supervised crew trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water caused the spill.

Without solid answers on whether the water is safe, many residents and top officials are still concerned, CBS Denver reports.

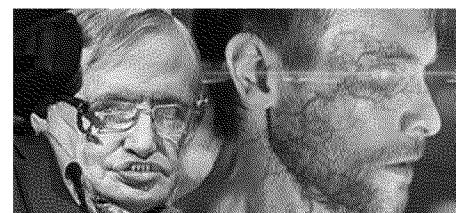
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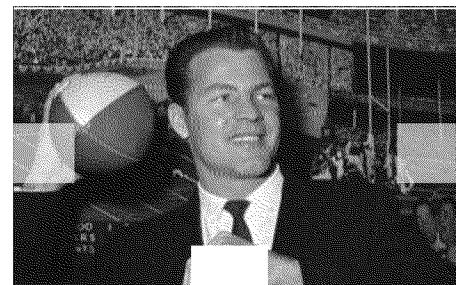
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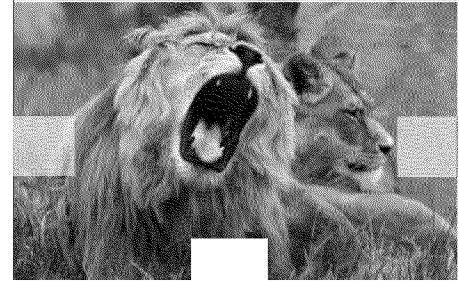
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"My water well is 50 feet from the Animas River, and we're awaiting the results like many of you," said Sheriff Sean Smith at Sunday night's public meeting.

The images of the tainted river have Durango residents like Joe Genualdi worried.

"It's already hard enough to catch fish in the Animas, and this stuff, it's definitely not good for them," Genualdi told CBS News. "It's going to kill a lot of fish off."

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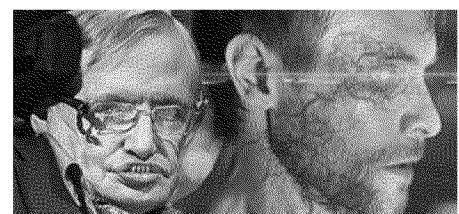
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## What the EPA was doing when it sent yellow sludge spilling into a Colorado creek

By Sarah Kaplan August 10 at 7:21 AM

The whole point of the project was to make Colorado's water safer.

Instead, while working to clean a mine in the San Juan mountains last Wednesday, workers with the Environmental Protection Agency unintentionally made the problem worse. A plug at the Gold King Mine site failed, the mine's owners told [the Denver Post](#), releasing 3 million gallons of toxic yellow sludge into Colorado's waterways. By Sunday night, the plume had reached Farmington, N.M., more than 100 miles to the south.

*[EPA triples estimate of mine waste spilled into Colo. river]*

The sight of the wastewater, long pent up in a mine that hasn't been operational since 1923, shocked the state and put the EPA in the hot seat. Why was the agency using heavy machinery at a site known to be full of toxins?

The answer, like the wastewater itself, is a part of Colorado's history.

Burrowed into the state's craggy mountains are thousands of mines like Gold King, built during the mining bonanza that marked Colorado's beginnings. Though most of them have been closed for decades, they continue to make their presence known through the acids that slowly leach — and occasionally violently burst — into the water around them.

"The great news is that modern mining does not allow the release of these waters," Elizabeth Holley, assistant professor of mining engineering at the Colorado School of Mines, told [the Denver Post](#). "The bad news is we owe our statehood to mining prior to any environmental regulations."

The documented gold discovery in Colorado is attributed to a Georgia prospector named Lewis Ralston, who was part of a wagon train bound for the already famous mines of California. According to lore, members of the train were resting for a day and Ralston, on a whim, decided to dip his gold pan into an unnamed mountain stream. It emerged with \$5 worth of gold, a sizable sum for the time.

A fellow traveler noted in a brusque June 22, 1850, diary entry, "Lay bye. Gold found."

Members of the wagon train lingered only a few days to examine the find, but Ralston would return eight years later with a team of prospectors. Those men soon found rich gold deposits in the mountains nearby, setting off the gold rush that would turn Colorado from an unexplored frontier of Kansas territory into its own booming state. Colorado was admitted to the Union in 1876.

The towering San Juan mountains around Silverton, Colo., were opened to prospectors in 1874. By the 1880s, more than half a dozen mines were operating in the area, including Gold King, most of them run by the Sunnyside Gold Corp.

Rich with veins of silver, gold and other precious metals, the mines drew thousands of people to the area. The nearby towns — Silverton, Telluride, the aptly named Eureka — were built on the estimated \$150 million in minerals that were extracted from the mountains. But the wealth came at a cost.

When underground water runs through a mine, it picks up traces of the minerals that are buried there, explains Colorado Public Radio station KUNC. When it mixes with mineral pyrite, it reacts with air to form sulfuric acid and dissolved iron. It also picks up other heavy metals, like copper and lead, as well as any of the chemicals that miners have been using to extract the resources. By the time it trickles out of the mountain and into nearby waterways, it's an acidic, often-toxic brew.

In mineral-rich mountains like the site of the Gold King mine, this process can happen even before prospectors start digging in. Cement Creek, the waterway that was first flooded with sludge last week, had been declared undrinkable in 1876, before mining in the area became widespread, according to the Denver Post. But drilling into the mountain sped things up quite a bit.

Ginny Brannon, director of the Colorado Division of Reclamation Mining and Safety, told the Denver Post that until 1977, Colorado had few laws requiring mining companies to deal with the wastewater they created.

"Folks could go out and do what they want and walk away from the sites, and this is one of them," she said.

The Gold King mine hasn't been operational since 1923, but several other sites in the same network of mines remained open for decades after. For more than 100 years, the mines were the lifeblood of the surrounding community. They provided the bulk of the jobs and one-third of the county's annual tax revenue, according to the Durango Herald.

Even two major disasters in the 1970s — a breach in a "tailing pond" (the basins that store contaminated water for processing) that sent tons of wastewater into the local watershed and a 1978 lake collapse that flooded the mine with water and a million tons of mud — didn't dampen support for the operation.

The multimillion-dollar cleanup costs did. In 1991, Sunnyside shut down its last mine in the area. And much of San Juan County was shut down with it.

“We lost half our population,” Beverly Rich, the county treasurer and chairwoman of the San Juan County Historical Society, told Westword magazine in 2005. “We went from about 200 children to 43 kids in our school. We lost one-third of our county tax revenue. We lost a lot of our volunteer firemen — and good-paying jobs. Mining pays well, and tourism jobs don’t quite cut the mustard.”

The effects of more than a century of mining didn’t disappear along with them. They’re easily visible in the histories of local community, which often glorify their mining past. Silverton’s motto, after all, is “The mining town that never quit.”

“Did mining kill people? Of course, it killed people. Driving cars kills people, too. Do you want to get rid of cars?” Historian Duane Smith, a Durango resident and Fort Lewis College professor who has written several books about Silverton, told the Durango Herald in 2013. “Silverton owes its existence to mining, that’s the truth.”

The lingering effects are also noticeable in the area’s waterways, which were suffering even before this latest breach. According to the Herald, three of the four fish species in the Upper Animas water basin (which includes Cement Creek and drains into the Animas River) disappeared between 2005 and 2010. Five years after that, the river was completely devoid of fish.

Insects and bird species have also fared poorly. And tests of the water flowing into Bakers Bridge, about three dozen miles south of Silverton, found that it carried concentrations of zinc toxic to animals. U.S. Geological Survey Scientists told the paper that the area was the largest untreated drainage site in the state.

The Animas River Stakeholders Group that was set up to deal with the issue after the mines were closed, which includes Sunnyside Gold Corp., didn’t have the estimated \$12 million to \$15 million it would take to treat the contaminated runoff. And for years, Silverton residents resisted EPA involvement out of fear that the “Superfund” label given to the nation’s worst hazardous waste sites would jeopardize the tourism industry — the only source of income that could replace the vanished mines. A few even hoped that the mines would reopen one day.

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Meanwhile supporters of EPA intervention accused Sunnyside of stonewalling the cleanup attempt to avoid liability.

The two sides reached an agreement of sorts this year. The mines would not be designated a Superfund site, and the EPA would provide \$1.5 billion to plug the problematic Red and Bonita mine, where polluted water drained at a rate

of 500 gallons per minute, according to the [Durango Herald](#).

But water has a habit of finding its way downhill, and plugging one mine often means it simply leaks from others, so the agency had to excavate and stabilize the Gold King mine upstream.

That's what they were up to on Aug. 5, when the loose material holding the mine together finally gave way. The water that had accumulated in the mine's long-abandoned tunnels went tumbling into Cement Creek.

"It was known that there was a pool of water back in the mine, and EPA had a plan to remove that water and treat it, you know, slowly," Peter Butler, who serves as a co-coordinator of the stakeholders group, told [KUNC](#). "But things didn't go quite the way they planned and there was a lot more water in there than they thought, and it just kind of burst out of the mine."

The EPA has taken a lot of flak for the way it handled the incident — residents weren't notified for 24 hours after the breach. But agency officials said that the toxic flood just highlights the need to deal with the rest of the state's 22,000 abandoned mines.

"It's very unfortunate," Bruce Stover, the Colorado Department of Mining official in charge of dealing with abandoned mine sites, told [the Associated Press](#). "We've been fighting this war for years, and we've lost a battle. But we're going to win the war."

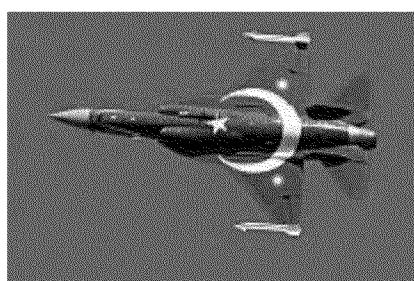
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Sarah Kaplan is a reporter for Morning Mix.

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# Colorado river spill underscores threat of old hard-rock mines

By DAVID KELLY

AUGUST 10, 2015, 3:00 AM | REPORTING FROM DURANGO, COLO.

**K**eena Kimmel's bookshop occupies a cozy curve along the Animas River, a place of wild sunflowers and lilacs where fisherman try their luck and kayakers glide under iron bridges.

But this weekend the river was empty and Kimmel's heart broken.

"Years ago I was passing through on the way to Oregon and ended up staying because it was so beautiful," she said, gazing over the vacant waters. "I can't believe what's happened. I guess I'm still kind of in shock."

Shock, sadness and anger have gripped this pretty college town in southwestern Colorado as residents struggle to understand the slow-moving environmental disaster that has transformed their crystal clear Animas River — or the River of Souls, translated from its Spanish name — into a ribbon of mustard yellow sludge.

The tragedy in Durango underscores the persistent menace of defunct hard-rock mines, lingering like cancers across the American landscape.

And for those with livelihoods put on hold, or possibly destroyed, by the spill, seeing the disaster unfold is made even more difficult because the culprits were their own government.

On Wednesday, the Environmental Protection Agency was supervising the draining of contaminated water from the defunct Gold King Mine above the town of Silverton. The water suddenly surged, overwhelming the crew and spilling into a tributary leading to the Animas River. The EPA initially estimated the spill at 1 million gallons, but tripled it to 3 million gallons Sunday.

A slew of heavy metals — cadmium, aluminum, copper and perhaps even arsenic — turned the water a sickly fluorescent yellow. Local officials immediately ordered the river shut down.

"I want to come clean here," EPA Regional Administrator Shaun McGrath said at a public meeting in Durango on Friday. "Our initial assessment of this was inappropriate in that we did not know what we were dealing with here. Some of our earlier comments may have sounded cavalier about the impact to public health and wildlife."

McGrath said at a public meeting Sunday that officials had tripled the estimate of the toxic spill based on data from a U.S. Geological Survey water gauge downstream. He said that the leading edge of the plume could no longer be seen from the air and that Cement Creek, which carried the sludge into the Animas, appeared to be running clear.

Durango and La Plata County proclaimed states of emergency Sunday. Gov. John Hickenlooper plans to come to the area Tuesday, officials said.

Meanwhile, the plume has flowed downstream to Aztec and Farmington, N.M., and is expected to reach the San Juan River, Lake Powell and eventually the Colorado River.

"Honestly, it's a complete catastrophe and we don't even understand the full significance of it yet," said Ian Lenney, 23, who studies environmental science at Fort Lewis College in Durango and works at a health food store. "I don't plan to swim in the river for years. I don't plan to eat fish from the river. These heavy metals stick around and get into the food chain. I think you'll see fish and wildlife die-offs."

So far there are no reports of die-offs. In fact, state wildlife officials put out 108 trout in cages throughout the river and reported just one death.

Lenney seemed stunned by the EPA's role in the accident.

"You'd think a federal agency would be a lot more cautious, that there would be double and triple redundancies to prevent something like this," he said. "Who do you run to when your own government is at fault? We are all going to pay. Maybe we set ourselves up for this by not acting to clean these sites sooner."

The danger posed by mines was laid out in a 1993 report from the Mineral Policy Center, a Washington think tank dedicated to identifying threats to natural resources. The study said there were about 557,650 of these sites in 32 states and 50 billion tons of untreated waste covering public and private land. The waste included arsenic, asbestos, cadmium, cyanide and mercury.

"Mine effluents have already polluted 12,000 miles of the nation's waterways and 180,000 acres of our lakes and reservoirs and are a growing threat to underground aquifers," the report said.

About 40% of all Western headwater streams are polluted by old hard-rock mines, the EPA has said. Colorado has 22,000 such mines, ranking third behind Arizona and Nevada. Cleaning them up is difficult because the owners are often dead or unknown. Even if they are alive, many fear making matters worse by trying to remedy the situation, as the EPA just did.

Early mining techniques were all about speed and efficiency, with little or no regard for the

environmental consequences.

For example, the Sierra Fund's 2008 report titled "Mining's Toxic Legacy" said that millions of gallons of mercury were used to extract gold from ore and that untold tons of waste rock were left to leak their toxic contents into rivers and streams.

And as Gold King shows, the legacy lives on.

Many here believe the EPA had good intentions in trying to clean out the mine but faulty methods. And those methods could cost the city and entire region for years to come. The heavy metals in the plume will settle to the river bottom and get stirred up again and again by rains and runoff.

"We will have to do long-term monitoring and probably more closures in the future," said the EPA's McGrath.

That could be bad news for those who make their living on the 126-mile-long river.

"It's difficult emotionally and economically to see the river damaged like that," said Alex Mickel, owner of Mild to Wild, Durango's biggest rafting company. "We were doing 230 people a day until Wednesday. We have already had to cancel hundreds of reservations."

Mickel expects the EPA to compensate him for his loss, which he estimates at \$150,000 so far.

"They tried to do the right thing but failed to follow their own procedures — they admitted that — so they need to help the community economically," he said.

The waters have eerily changed colors as the plume advances, going from canary yellow to mustard to brown. "To tell you the truth, what happened here is sickening," said resident Nathan Arnold, 30. So many people depend on the river: fishing guides, hotel workers, kayak operators, farmers.

"The river is the lifeblood of the Four Corners," Arnold said, referring to the area where Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah meet.

The big question is whether the river will come back.

"At one point in the 1950s, the Animas was declared dead, and then it became a gold medal trout stream 30 years later," Mickel said. "I don't think we will need to wait another 30 years."

Looking at the jaundiced river on Saturday, it was hard to imagine revival any time soon.

Not only were the people missing, so were the birds and other animals. Earlier that morning, a

group of people prayed at the water's edge for divine help in healing the river. They too were awaiting answers.

*Kelly is a special correspondent. Times staff writer Connie Stewart in Los Angeles contributed to this report.*

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## DENVER AND THE WEST

### Experts estimate 55,000 toxic mine



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By Nicholas Racine

The Associated Press

POSTED: 08/10/2015 12:01:00 AM MDT

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Beneath the western United States lie thousands of old mining tunnels filled with the same toxic stew that spilled into a Colorado river last week, turning it into a nauseating yellow concoction and stoking alarm about contamination of drinking water.

Though the spill into the Animas River is unusual for its size, it's only the latest instance of the region grappling with the legacy of a centuries-old mining boom that helped populate the region but also left buried toxins.

Until the late 1970s, there were no regulations on mining in most of the region. Abandoned mines fill up with groundwater and snowmelt that becomes tainted with acids and heavy metals from mining veins which can trickle into the region's waterways. Experts estimate there are 55,000 such abandoned mines from Colorado to Idaho to California, and federal and state authorities have struggled to clean them for decades. The federal government says 40 percent of the headwaters of Western waterways have been contaminated from mine runoff.

The Clean Water Act says that anyone who contributes to pollution of a waterway can be prosecuted for a federal crime, even if they were trying to clean up pollution. That's kept environmental groups from helping the EPA treat water and tidy up mines.



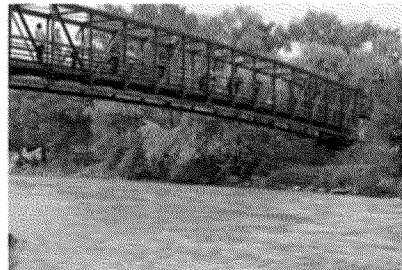
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Onlookers view the Animas River from a bridge as orange sludge from a mine spill upstream in Colorado flows past Berg Park in Farmington, N.M., on Aug. 8, 2015. (Alexa Rogals, The Associated Press)

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([http://www.denverpost.com/broncos/cl\\_28561353/jake-long-visit-broncos-could-lead-help-offensive](http://www.denverpost.com/broncos/cl_28561353/jake-long-visit-broncos-could-lead-help-offensive))

[Think tank: Crates, trucks at Iran site ahead of UN visit](#)  
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[Judge: Steak 'n Shake franchise owners](#)

